

Only Child by Ink Dinkedink (SingingSpringingLark)

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Summary:

I was a terrible person to stand there and glare while everyone else seemed so happy for you to be reunited with your sister. But I couldn't help it. I just wanted to storm out and scream, curse and cry. Because no one wants their beloved sibling taken away from them.

Only Child

Author's Note:

A companion to "The Promise".

Just at noon, we sat on the hills watching over the refugee camp. We drank, we joked, and we talked about the adventures we shared. But now you're gone and I can't find you anywhere. Kay said you'd probably left early with escorts just like Sheba did, and she might as well be right. I feel silly for running all over the camp looking for you, but I really wanted to say goodbye and hold you one more time...

I want to tell you how much you mean to me.

Mum's cousin, Pontius, has offered us a place to stay in Bilibin. His son would arrive and pick us up today.

I'd like to visit you in Kalay sometime, but with all the new responsibilities waiting, I doubt it'll happen anytime soon. Perhaps it won't even happen at all; travelling isn't cheap. It was one thing being a questing adventurer with nothing else to worry about, but it's another story when you have to support a family and keep a job in town. Moving to a new place and starting over from scratch is hard enough. I don't want to be a burden to my relatives. I barely know them, and I really don't want to be kicked out of the house in the first week for being a freeloader. It'll be rough. I grew up in a farming village; I'm probably not fit for city life, but I'll pull through, somehow—I've survived far worse, you know.

You could visit me though; you have the resources, but perhaps you won't have the time. The Merchant King wants to make you his heir. His *heir*! You'll return to Kalay as a *true prince*. You'll get a hero's welcome with fanfares, flowers and

maybe even a parade. You don't know how happy I was when you told me the people of Kalay will finally see you in a different light. My heart swelled with pride and joy and I wanted to hold you and tell you how happy I was for you.

But now you've left without a word, and I can't help but feel left behind. You'll have thousands of admirers, and everyone will want to be your friend. Who am I to stake a claim on the prince's friendship and attention? At best, you'll hear I've become a watchman or mercenary in Bilibin. At worst, you'll find me as a poor farmhand somewhere on the countryside. Wouldn't it be funny if we met again someday under those circumstances? A poor farmhand and the mighty prince. I wonder if you'd make me kneel. I wonder if you'll still let me call you by your name. I wonder... would you even remember the lowly peasant fighter you once called friend?

The evening sun shines brightly; warmly. I help Gareth move the last crate of his family's possessions aboard the Lemurian ship. Piers wants to ferry us to the east, but I've declined his offer. I don't want my second cousin to arrive here for nothing. I'm not good with people, but even I know that'll be a bad start for the relationship. I'm going to live with my relatives for quite some time so I don't want to offend him. I smile. This makes me miss you even more—if only you were here to read his mind and tell me what to say to get on his good side.

I step towards the edge of the boat. I cast a glance over the refugee camp. Everyone's leaving now. Vale will soon vanish from the map. Only the ruins will remain and remind us of a village with people who once protected the secrets of Alchemy. And years after that, even those ruins will disappear under forests and greenery. Nothing of importance will be missed.

“Hey, look.”

Garet points over my shoulder towards the camp where my mum is speaking with my supposed cousin. He’s wearing a long cape and hat with a tassel on top. I can’t see his face, but he seems like a sophisticated person; he bows, he nods and he gestures towards his closed carriage. I don’t care where Dad and Mum want to take me; I’ll be a stranger in town anyway—but I hope it’ll be easy to get along with my relatives.

I still remember the life I lived before the storm. I used to think I’d be able to return to that easy life after the misadventure. But now my village is gone and I’ve scared Felix and Jenna away with my worst side.

I thought I could still connect to Felix, but I know he prefers Garet and Piers’s company over mine. He says he still cares for me deeply, so I suppose we’re still friends, but even that feels like a lie to me. Everything’s changed, and I’ve come to realize it too. I’ve never been an admirable person, but Felix always knew how to make me feel special. He was childishly naïve, optimistic to a fault, and had the warmest smile. When we were children, he complimented my bravery and said I was good with my hands. He gave me his favourite scarf, and told me I was his brother and friend. He said he wished he was as strong and brave as me, even though he was taller, bigger and could probably overpower me if he really tried.

Today I’m both taller and stronger than him. And he is moody, and not cheerful at all. He’s changed, but I’m still the same. I’m still the stupid, desperate child he rescued from loneliness many years ago. But he’s no longer the Sweet Felix he used to be. Back then, he would put on a smile for everyone else to see, but only Jenna and I were

allowed to see him cry. I used to be drying his tears, even if I was the one who caused them—he always forgave me, knowing I’m impulsive but not cruel. Now he thinks I’m selfish and arrogant, violent and cold. And I think he’s become uncaring and blind. He doesn’t trust me the way he used to. He doesn’t need me the way he used to; Piers and Sheba have taken my place in his heart.

Remember how I got into a fight with Felix in Contigo after bickering about who should be leader? I was so angry that he made me chase him all over the world. He didn’t even properly apologize to me and Gareth for stringing us along. So I wanted to hurt and humiliate him. I wanted to make him feel just a fraction of what I felt when he practically told me I was too dumb to understand his mission.

We duelled on the town square at dawn. I dragged out the fight just to let the message sink in. But then I accidentally landed a bad cut on his wrist when I disarmed him for the fifth time and he cried out in that low half-sob I could never forget. I instantly reverted to the lonely child who once swore to protect him from all harm. I dropped my sword and ran towards him with a healing hand. I wanted to hold him and tell him I was sorry. But those two upper class twits, Piers and Sheba, they pushed me away before I could reach him. And he didn’t even look at me—he just let his new friends lead him away. In that moment, I realized that I’d been naive to believe that no one would ever take my place.

I wished for glory. I wished for fame. But all I got is this hollow feeling I can’t even describe.

Yesterday on the feast held in our honour, Felix put me on a pedestal. We shared our tales. He and Gareth purposely twisted the story to make me come off as a way better person than I really was. Had I been three years younger, I

would've enjoyed the attention. But I no longer wanted to lie to others, or lie to myself. I told everyone the truth, and only took credit for dealing the last blow to the three-headed dragon, something Felix and Gareth both didn't even want to mention. I understand—they don't want to remind me of that painful moment. They want to forget it altogether. But I don't think I can ever forget. I betrayed Felix and Jenna, and everyone turned against me. Everyone save for *you*.

I knew my dad was the dragon. I overcame my fear and hesitation and decapitated the three-headed beast. Because that's what my dad would have wanted me to do. He would've wanted me to restore his honour even if it meant his own death. I stood tall and emotionless as the victor and I said nothing when our family members all reverted to human form. Felix and Jenna dropped their weapons and ran to their parents, crying in hurt and confusion. But I stood tall, unmoved. I exchanged a look with Dad. He smiled and gave me an approving nod before giving up breathing. I felt as if my heart had been torn out from my chest, but I didn't shed a single tear. Afterwards, it all became a cursing contest against the Wise One—everyone shouted about how cruel it was to make me and Jenna kill our parents. All the shouting only put further strain on my already broken spirit; I just wanted to mourn in peace. I was an idiot to open my mouth and yell at them. I was an idiot to tell them I knew what I was doing when I lifted my sword.

There was a dead silence, and then the hostility was suddenly directed to *me*. Gareth said I was cold. Mia refused to look at me. Sheba said I was heartless, and Piers went so far as saying I was “completely void of emotions”. Jenna called me a *murderer*, understandably. She screamed and would have strangled me if Piers hadn't restrained her. As for Felix, he held on to his parents' dead bodies and wept. I put a hand on his shoulder and tried to explain, but he turned

around and punched out my front teeth. I couldn't dodge the hit—I never saw it coming. I didn't expect silent, gentle Felix to jump into a sudden rage and attack me. I staggered back and almost fell—there was no one behind to catch me. Felix stared at me; his eyes were full of hate. He told me to get lost. He said that I was no friend of his. That was the last thing I expected to hear from the person I once considered my best friend and brother. What did he expect me to do? What could *he* have done if I'd told him about the dragon? Would he have restrained me and let the monster run us over? Really?

I wanted to yell at him, and I probably would have done so if I'd been a couple of years younger. But that day, I stayed silent and walked away. I put my teeth back and I turned away from the rest of the group as they began urging Felix to fire the beacon so that our parents' sacrifice wouldn't be for naught. I wanted to cry, I wanted to scream, but I couldn't. My eyes remained dry and my lips were glued shut. I wanted to cry and wail. I was so sad and hurt—my dad just died and all my friends had just rejected me; why couldn't I cry?

In my sorrow and desperation, I began stepping towards the edge of the tower. I wanted all of this to end. I wanted to be with my father again. At least he understood me. I was about to take the final step, when I felt your tender touch. Your slender arms found their way around my middle, and I felt your face pressing against my back. Your grip on the front of my tunic tightened and you gently pulled me back from the edge. I heard a sniffle, a sob, and in the next moment you were crying. I made no move to show appreciation, but I knew in that moment I'd always have light no matter how dark the night became. In that moment, I knew I'd always have warmth, no matter how cold the world became.

You were always there for me—even when everyone had turned their backs on me. You're more than just a friend. I've never said it sincerely, but you probably already know. You know everything about me. You know my past, my present and probably my future too—there's nothing I can hide. But with you, I feel safe. There's no secret I can't trust you with. It doesn't feel like you're staying with me out of pity. I feel loved and wanted completely, and it's something I don't feel every day considering the terrible person I can be. You'd probably say that isn't true. You'd say I'm a victim of circumstances, and that you can find a loving heart under my cold shell. You make me remember I'm just a human and not some godsent warrior from the heavens above.

I'm not a hero or a knight in shining armour. I didn't head out on that quest because that rocky thing with an eye told me to go save the world—I didn't even believe those jewels had the power to destroy the world until I witnessed the light of Mercury! No, I embarked on that journey because I wanted to save my friends, *and* because the authority figures in Vale charged me responsible for the theft of the relics. In other words, all I wanted to do was to save Jenna, ask Felix what the hell was wrong with him and clear my own name. Saving the world and becoming a hero was a nice bonus I used to look forward to, until the very journey proved to be too much for me to handle alone...

I had no feelings for the unfortunate Koliman townsfolk suffering from the curse. I went with the plan because Gareth and Mia ran me over in a fight. Mia and Gareth, the paragons of justice and compassion, reasoned it was our duty as Messengers of Good to help the people. I, on the other hand, reasoned more people would suffer and die if Felix succeeded in firing the beacons. Besides, why should I clean up McCoy's mess, when *he* should be the one offering his own life to make up for his crimes? And why should *I* go find

the Isles of Legends, which might not even exist, just because the cowardly ruler of Tolbi wants to cheat death? *No*, the promise of finding Lemuria was just *a lame excuse* to take Babi's magic ship and use it find Jenna and Felix. It's not as if he could *do anything* about it once I left Gondowan!

So I had selfish motives ever since the beginning of this ordeal. I gave promises I never intended to keep. I lied and cheated to get to the Eastern Sea. So what? I'm no hero. I'm just a simple peasant with very simple needs and wishes.

I even intended to cheat you out of your services when I first heard of you. A lost servant with a talent for getting secret information? Perfect, we just needed such a person to help us track down temple robbers! But I expected to see a tall grimy man speaking in coins and numbers, not a troubled kid with powers he didn't know the origin of.

I estimated your age around twelve or eleven when we met. You were so small. From your eyes, I could tell you were lost and scared of being alone in this world of strangers. I figured it would be wise to coax you into trusting me before we got down to business, so I sat down at your table and talked to you. And as we talked, I found we had quite a lot in common. You were an Adept—a Messenger of Good, like me. You were alone because you were different, like me. You'd lost a treasure, and had been charged by your superior to reclaim it, like me. And you were worried you'd disappoint your father—just like me. It was such a simple gesture—I put a hand on your shoulder—and you let all walls down. You looked at me earnestly, and said you weren't really the Merchant King's servant, but his adoptive son. You swallowed all pride and begged on your knees, pleading me to help you retrieve your father's lost treasure. You had such

an innocent face. You clutched onto me so tightly and spoke as if I was your only hope—how could I refuse?

I've never wanted to help a stranger so badly before. I saw myself in you—you were so soft-spoken and kind. You weren't like the rest of the people in town. You didn't point at my direction, or sneer at my despicable clothing. At the time, you didn't even offer a reward. You just said "please". And that little "please" was enough.

Your only sin was to be born a telepath. No matter how gentle and kind they appear to be, telepaths were known to be two-faced soulless liars. Once I found out you could read minds, I got scared. What if you were a spy Felix had hired and placed there for me to come by? I pushed you away. I might look strong and mighty to you, but my heart is that weak—it wouldn't survive another betrayal.

You got brutalized by the thieves who stole your heirloom. They dragged you into an alley and beat you up. They would've killed you if I didn't walk in on the scene. They scrambled when I called for the town guards. I scooped up your broken body in my arms. I healed you, crying and cursing myself for not believing your words. I wanted to help you again. I wanted to help you get your heirloom back so that you could go home.

You promised you wouldn't use your powers on me, but you didn't keep your word. After stopping the thieves, you probed my mind when I let my guard down. I was so angry... so *scared*. Could you possibly have faked everything just to get close enough to read my mind? Did you go so far as to let those brigands beat you up for sympathy? Were you an agent all along? Were all those emotions and even your story fake?—fabricated to suit the situation?

I'm rash and unreasonable when I'm angry. But I had enough self-control not to strangle you on the spot. Your eyes—they told me a different tale when you pleaded for mercy. A part of me refused to believe you were a spy. A part of me *desperately wanted* to trust you. I let you go, but I wasn't sure if I did the right thing. I was still worried that you'd run back to the temple robbers and report on me. I was afraid of not being strong enough for the mission, and I was scared that my naivety might lead to Jenna's suffering and death.

But you didn't run to Felix and the temple robbers. You came back to *me*. We met again at the Goma Range a week later. You said you couldn't get into Lunpa, and I quickly said there was no way I'd help you. You stuttered, but you managed to say you didn't come back to request help. You said you were there to *help me*.

I laughed. I couldn't believe it. A boy with no survival skills whatsoever was trying to help me? You looked so pathetic that day. I just wanted you to leave. So I taunted and belittled you. I told you to prove yourself useful. I asked you to remove the roadblock that hindered my journey. You looked so confused and scared, and I sneered in your direction while you wandered around and tried to figure something out. But you passed the test. You removed the vines holding down the rocks blocking the passage. I hesitated at first, but after you begged me again and cried you were hungry and cold and would die if I left you behind, I took you in.

At first, I didn't enjoy your company. You were delicate like a flower and fragile like a damn butterfly! You couldn't sleep on hard surfaces, you made faces when you ate my food, and you lagged behind as we wandered. I was worried whether you'd make it to the north aileve, since you began

losing weight as we travelled; I noticed because I carried you when your feet became chafed.

Then, you told me you haven't trained combat Psynergy before, so I taught you some basic spells so that you could defend yourself. I never thought teaching you would be a mistake—you just got in our way and hurt yourself. I always had to rush to your rescue when you tried fighting monsters and beasts. And then there was that fight atop Mercury Lighthouse. You fired your spells like a blind idiot, striking me down with your lightning bolts. I told you to get off the field, but you didn't listen. And then the temple robber got you. He mercilessly brought his magic sword down on you. And then you cried out... *my name*.

We made it out alive, but I had failed to protect you. I was too weak. You trusted me and I couldn't protect you.

So I tried paying a merchant to bring you home, but you refused to leave my side. I yelled at you. I told you you were a liability and that I was kicking you out of the team. But you pleaded with me to let you stay, and gave me so many promises of getting better, both in health and usefulness. You tugged my heartstrings again, and once again I couldn't say no.

In Kolima, Mia called me a reckless fool and an honourless tramp. We've been on uneven grounds ever since she joined. I saw her as a rival the moment she tried becoming our leader. That day in Kolima, she said so many things that hit right home. I normally don't fight women, but she managed to provoke me into a fight. And she beat me fair and square.

That night, I questioned why anyone would want to follow me. I wondered if it wasn't better to drag my sorry ass back

to Vale and let Gareth and Mia deal with the quest—they were obviously more capable than I was. And that night, you surprisingly arrived to my room in the inn with a tray of warm food.

You saw things others didn't see. You were always there supporting, comforting. But as sensitive as I was, I thought you did it out of pity. I thought you did it just to "*Hah-ha!*" in my face. So I threw you out and smashed the food. I regretted it shortly afterwards, but I was too much of a coward to apologize. But you still forgave me.

Even after we reconciled, our friendship was shaky—built on promises we couldn't keep. I said I wouldn't keep secrets, but there were always things I hid from you. I lied to you left and right. I was too ashamed of my flaws to admit I had any. You said you wouldn't read my mind, but you always did it whenever you could. You were always afraid you weren't good enough to be in the team, always afraid you'd disappoint me with your poor performance in battle. And I grew protective of you, so protective that I couldn't stop treating you as a child even after learning you were fifteen years old. I always thought of my promise to Lady Layana—to keep you safe, take good care of you, and help you find your real parents.

It was my fault you took that step. I should have given you proper Psynergy-training instead of trying to keep you back from danger. When rest of us sought the Djinn's favour, I cut you out from the deal—I was afraid you wouldn't be able to handle them and let them consume you. I just wanted to keep you safe from harm. I never thought you'd take offence and go your own way.

The Djinn's powers were devastating under your command—I don't think we'd have won the fight on Venus Lighthouse

so easily if you hadn't helped us. Afterwards, the spirits granted you the power of predicting the future as a bonus, which would have been great if they didn't try pushing you towards the state of insanity at the same time. You seemed fine at the beginning though; you smiled and were happy you no longer were a burden to me. I was glad, but still worried about the Djinn. Mia and Gareth said I acted like an overprotective parent, but I noticed you acted weird on occasion—you were restless, and sometimes you talked to yourself. I asked you to stop using the Djinn once, but you were overly sensitive about it and yelled at me. It turned out the Djinn sent you nightmares, making it hard for you to tell apart dream from prediction. When things went from bad to worse during the journey across the ocean, those Djinn conjured up illusions and made you attack us for seemingly no reason. We had to tie you down, drug you or sometimes even hurt you to make you snap out of it. I watched over you, day and night; I had to keep you safe. But then the spirits almost made you stick a sword in me, and you left the group to save us from further harm. You left alone, without any supplies or money; I figured it was a rash decision you would regret. I had to find you, or else you'd end up dead in the wilderness! Still, on that day we also found clues of Jenna and Felix's whereabouts, and I was set up for a choice I never wanted to make.

I really wanted to find them. I missed them so much. Yet, I couldn't let you go. I promised you that I'd be your friend through thick and thin. I promised to cherish you and love you. I couldn't just leave you like that. So I suggested to Mia and Gareth we split up. There were arguments as usual, but this time I won. I didn't fight them. I didn't yell or throw a childish tantrum. I begged. I rarely beg, but I begged that day—for you. I earnestly admitted my flaws that day—for you.

“Please. Please let me go find him,” I said. “It's my fault he's in this situation. I've got to find him and bring him back. If we all go searching for him, we'll lose Jenna. But if we follow the traces to find her, then I... *then I might never see him again!* Please, I can't do this alone. *Please*, let me find him. Please, save Jenna for me. And please tell her I'm sorry.”

I felt as if everyone dear to me was being taken away. First my father. Then Felix. Then Jenna... and then *you*. Mia and Gareth approved my leave and I promised to find them again after I've found you.

I tracked you to Champa. The townsfolk told me about a confused boy asking for directions to Xian. I figured you'd try to get back to Kalay that way, so I hurried eastwards, travelling day and night, only stopping to sleep for a few hours. I found you unconscious in an abandoned shrine, but I couldn't wake you with my Psynergy. My supplies had run out since I left in haste without restocking in town. I carried you as far I could, but I collapsed in exhaustion on the road. I thought we'd both die there, but we were rescued by Feizhi and a band of mercenaries.

When you woke up and saw my face, you were both relieved and scared. You apologized over and over, saying you should have listened to me, instead of thinking you knew better. You then said I was an idiot to come after you.

“I'm nothing but a burden!” you said. “I was a burden before we went to sea, and I'm now a danger to you as well! I-I... I should never have tried...”

“No—”

“No matter how hard I try, I'm still a burden...”

“No, you're wrong—”

"I-I *wrecked the ship*! We would've been in Lemuria now if I didn't—d-didn't—Wh-why did you come back to save me? Y-you should've left me for my own devices!"

"*Shut up!*" I yelled, grabbing your shoulders and giving you a rough shake. You turned silent. Then you lifted your head and stared at me with tears staining your cheeks.

"And where do you plan to go, *stupid?*" I continued, as loud as before. "Do you plan to go back to Kalay and wreck havoc in town with the spirits possessing you? What's done is *done*. We need to *fix* the problem—not *run* from it! How would Hammet and Layana feel once they find out what's happened to you? Do you really want to force them to put you down?"

I stared at with you, earnestly, and I shook you on the shoulders again—gently this time.

"You can't run from your problems forever," I said. "Do you understand? I'll protect you. We'll find a way. There *has* to be a way, and I'll find it! Just trust me. All right?"

I moved my hands from your shoulders to your cheeks, catching tears falling from your eyes on my thumbs. Your eyes were bloodshot; so red. You were pale like death and so thin. You must have suffered so much. I pulled you into my arms, and I pressed your head to my chest. And you cried. Cried and cried. You didn't even lift your arms to hold me back. And I just sat there, holding you, because I'm a dumb illiterate who doesn't know how to express myself with words.

Freeing you from the spirit's grasps was a long and painful journey. I was there, but I couldn't do much to help. All I could do was to prevent you from losing hope and giving up. All I could do was to stay near whenever you needed me and

be your anchor to the world. In the end, you were the one marking your own victory. And not until you'd proven yourself a master of your servants could you truly own the gift of divination.

We were in a settlement on the west bay of Gondowan when you had another prophetic dream. You were frightened and drenched in cold sweat when you woke up me in the middle of the night. You told me Gareth and Mia would die—you said they would plummet from a tall tower and *die*. I told you it was just a bad dream, but you assured me it wasn't. To ease your worries, at least a little, I paid a sailor to take us overseas as fast as possible.

You kept saying you hated your powers on the voyage. You said Gareth, Mia and I were blessed with our respective elements while you were cursed with Wind. You said your Psynergy had given you nothing else than pain and sorrow. But I told you your Psynergy had brought us together too. And I told you of everything you've done despite your young years. You were brave and strong, much stronger than I was. I said you'd be a great Adept one day, and even surpass all of us if you continued your training.

In the city of Contigo, we found our friends safe, treating the ill in the temple. We also found your real family's whereabouts—they were dead. You wanted to see their grave and I thought you'd despair, but you didn't seem to feel any sorrow at all. You said you'd never intended to leave your adoptive parents because they raised you and loved you, but that it was good to know your roots.

We've grown so close since we left Angara. I just didn't realize *how* important you were to me until those savages from the north beat you half-dead and wanted the Mars-gem in exchange for your life. I would never give in if there was

something else I could do, but one wrong move and that brute holding you hostage would snap your neck. So I made one last bet on that former friend of mine—that one friend who'd done nothing else than letting me down over the last two years. I gave the jewel to Felix, told him I trusted him, gave him a threatening stare, and then demanded you released. It broke my heart to see you slam your head against the floor another time. I pitifully crawled over to you, pulled you close to me and held you in my arms. I think I even cried, not caring that Jenna and her friends were watching. You didn't blame me for failing to protect you, but to my surprise you smiled—you tugged me closer to you and just smiled that genuine smile I never see you give anyone else... except *her*.

Your sister—Hama.

Shortly after our visit to the Jupiter Lighthouse, Hama revealed she was your lost sister. I don't know what came over me. I felt something knot inside my chest when you left my side and stepped over to her. I was a terrible person to stand there and glare while everyone else seemed so happy for you to be reunited with your sister. But I couldn't help it. I just wanted to storm out and scream, curse and cry. Because no one wants their beloved sibling taken away from them.

Why? Why would you just accept and forgive her so easily? Weren't you the slightest curious about *why* your parents abandoned you? Because of a prophecy? I don't care what prophecy it was—you just don't leave your child to a stranger, and hope everything will be all right. What if Hammet didn't keep the promise and instead sold you into slavery?

Fine. Let's say your parents could consistently predict your future. Fine. Let's leave the prophecy behind. But why didn't Hama tell you that you were her brother? She should have told you—*ages* ago! She knew you were her brother when we first met in Lama Temple! How long had she known the truth? If you had a big sister... if you had a big sister by your side, you wouldn't have been so lonely. But she didn't care. She was just fine sitting in the temple while you were bullied by those self-proclaimed "normal" people who called you a demon child!

Even so, I let you talk me into going back to that house a second time to see her before leaving Atteka. I hoped you'd find answers, and I hoped she'd explain herself.

You asked her why she didn't tell you sooner, and she spoke to you in half riddles. She said you played an important role in our mission, and that you'd be in Contigo too soon if she'd told you the truth earlier. There was no show of concern or feelings. She didn't even want to talk to you. It was painful to watch you try drag out a conversation while she obviously didn't want you in her presence. You began looking around the room, touching the furniture.

"This place," you said, trying to force another conversation. "This place is so familiar... I feel like I've lived here my whole life."

She looked at you, smiled, and then shook her head. For once she moved up to you. You winced and looked up at her face when she placed her hands on your shoulders like I usually do. You smiled to her, a smile full of hope and affection and admiration—the smile usually reserved for *me* only. But she said:

“Look at me, Ivan. You’re too sentimental. You would have given up your quest to find your true home, and we would all now be lost.”

For a moment you just stood and stared at her; speechless.

“What are you saying, sister?” you then squeaked.

“No, not sister...” replied Hama solemnly, taking her hands off your shoulders. “Do not think of me as your sister until you have fulfilled your destiny.”

What was that supposed to mean? Were you not *worthy* to be her brother yet? What kind of *sister* would say that to her *little brother*? I felt a wildfire running loose in my gut, and with emotions storming inside, I took a step out towards you and Hama. Felix stopped me though; he grabbed my shoulder, pulled me back and shook his head in disapproval. I stared back at him in disbelief, but I clenched my teeth and averting my eyes to the door. I wanted to just get you out of there and away from your “sister”, but I stayed quiet. I didn’t want to start a fight or embarrass you, but it infuriated me that your sister was more interested in talking to Felix and Kraden about the Elemental Lighthouses than spending time with you. Each passing moment, I saw you growing more and more upset. When Kraden tried being funny, you yelled at him, telling him to stop fooling around. I knew then it was a mistake to bring you there. I cut the conversation short, and suggested we leave immediately if world balance or whatever was in danger.

“I got too worked up about seeing my sister...” you told me, on the verge of tears. “Sorry.”

“It’s all right,” said Hama with a wry smile. “I’m happy that you cared so much...”

Happy? She didn't sound happy at all though. She was disappointed if anything! She expected you to be some great saviour and put everything else aside, including family. But considering how your parents cared for the prophecy more than their children's happiness, I wonder why I was surprised. You looked so sad and forlorn when I gestured to you to come with me. I tried to smile for your comfort, but I didn't touch you—I didn't want to give Hama another reason to think you were weak.

You didn't smile for days, and you lost your appetite. You insisted helping to fuel the ship day in and day out—I had to drag you away to bed for the sake of your health. Then Sheba began picking on you for apparently no good reason. I got into a fight with Jenna when I slapped that Laliverian brat in a fit of anger. The spoiled little princess was jealous because you found your family, while she did not. Heavens, if she only knew how much better it would've been if it was the other way around...

The third night after leaving Contigo, you snuck into my room and asked to share a bed. I lifted the blankets in silent invitation—we've shared due to financial reasons before and I *am* comfortable around you. I just didn't understand why you'd make that request, since you've wanted your own room ever since we left Kalay. You slept uneasily that night, turning back and forth. I was miffed that you kept stealing the blankets, so I moved to the empty bed in your room. I never thought I would hurt you in doing so. In the middle of the night, I woke up to find you hugging onto me tightly. Your arms were wrapped around my middle, and I could feel your nails clawing me through the linen shirt—how I was supposed to sleep? I tried to turn around, but your hold was too tight. You let go when I began scolding you and turned away and I was about to go back to sleep, but then I realized you were crying.

“Heavens,” I muttered, “how old did are you again?” But once I turned around and saw what a mess you were, I felt like a heartless bully. Putting a hand on your shoulder, I offered an apology.

“Hey, I'm sorry,” I said, “I didn't mean—”

You cut me off by pulling yourself into my arms. You mumbled something in between sobs, but I couldn't hear what you said. I've never seen you so upset before. You shivered and clung on me, helpless and inconsolable...

“A-am I n-not good enough to be h-her brother?” you wept.

“*What?*” I said, and I pried you off so that I could breathe. “*Who?* What are you talking about?”

“Si-sister! *H-hama...* sh-*she*—wh-what she said in Contigo—She, she said—”

I immediately pulled you close to me again. I pressed your face to my chest, stifling your words. I didn't want to hear. I couldn't make up a decent lie to tell you that Hama didn't mean what she said in Contigo. And I couldn't believe that finding your sister would cause you so much pain. In that moment I wished I'd never accepted Lady Layana's task. In that moment I felt it would've been better if you'd never known your real family. Suddenly, while clutching you, I realized how rough I was to an already hurt person. I thought you'd be scared and was about to release you, but you slipped your arms around my middle and gripped the back my linen shirt. Your breath evened in my possessive hold and you whispered something. I couldn't hear what you said, but I didn't want to appear inattentive so I kissed the top of your head and said “good-night”. I really wanted to tell you to just forget you ever had a sibling—what kind of sister told her little brother to earn the right to call her “sister”? But I

stayed silent—my bitter jealousy was the last thing you needed. And in all earnestness, what place does a *fake* brother have in the presence of a *real* sister? Still, holding you so close made it possible for me to forget you're someone else's brother. Once again, you made me forget that I was an only child...

I jump when I hear Piers ring the bell; the ship is leaving. The villagers who were talking near the ship hurry aboard. Gareth pats me on the shoulder and pulls me close. He pounds my back and then releases me, saying he'd miss the people and the adventure. I nod and I say we'll probably meet again soon in Bilibin. He assures me fate will be kind to us since we've saved the world. I smile and make my way around the ship, getting off the boat on the other side. Some villagers pull back the boarding plank and I watch the ship lift from the ground to soar the skies. As I walk back to the refugee camp, I feel lonely once more. Mum and Dad had packed our luggage into the carriage when I reach them. Several wagons run past me towards the southern road and one of the coachmen even yelled at me to watch my steps.

I look towards the road. The autumn sun gilds the landscape just perfectly. It's a beautiful sight. I'll sure miss this place once I leave. I'd like to come back here to reminisce the good times of my innocent childhood and our adventures when I'm old.

Felix can fool the whole world he's forgiven me, but I know he hasn't. He might still care for me to some degree, but I don't think he'll ever truly forgive me for almost shattering his entire world and taking his family away. Had it not been some sick test of the Wise One, I would have ended up taking away everything he and Jenna had worked for.

And I, I will never truly forgive Felix for running away instead of telling me why he wanted to fire the beacons. He says I wouldn't have listened back then, but that's a terrible excuse. He simply no longer trusts me. I should have caught on when he jumped off the Venus Lighthouse when I screamed I was there to *rescue* him...

I'm still hurting from the words he said atop Mars Lighthouse—even after he took everything back right after his parents could stand and walk again. What would he have done if his parents had truly died?

As for Jenna, she told Felix to throw the Mars Star into the beacon. I think she understood better how I reasoned when I killed the three-headed dragon. Still, whenever we speak, we feel like strangers even though we've loved each other since we were kids. It could be because she feels torn between me and her new friends, or simply because I've shown myself to be both scary and unreliable. I understand though. Both she and Felix need time to figure out if they can still love me after seeing my dark side. And until then, there will always be a rift between us. It's for the best that we part, at least for now.

I sigh. I get into my cousin's carriage and close the door. I sit down next to Dad and think of what a mess I am. I am a broken bird. Once, I soared the blue skies holding onto childish dreams—worryless and living every day to the fullest. But now my wings are clipped and I can no longer fly. I've carried the weight of responsibility so long I've forgotten how it felt to be free. My wounds won't ever mend completely, but with you by my side, the pain had always been bearable. You were the person who held me close to your heart when all of Weyard had turned against me. You'll always be a little brother to me, even when you're not here.

But I won't set myself up for more disappointment. I know a bond weakens when friends stay apart. I won't fool myself to believe in friendships that last forever again. Instead I'd keep my hopes low and let you surprise me when I'm old, frail, and maybe forgotten by everyone else.

Still, I find it likely that you'll one day love Hama more than you love me. After all, kinship is unbreakable while friendship can die. One day, I'll just be another memory. I was childish and jealous the day I thought badly about Hama in Contigo, and I deserve to die alone and friendless for wishing to take her place. But I can't help despising her for what she said to you that day. Still, if she can see goodness in the Wise One who pitted my dad against me on the final lighthouse, then perhaps her own cold façade also hides a heart of gold. I do hope so from the bottom of my heart. Because if there's anything you deserve more than a fruitful life, then it is the loving, caring sibling you've always wished for.

* * *

He jumps when the coachman opens the door to count passengers. For a second, Isaac stares at the young man with the familiar face, but before he couldn't ask more questions his cousin closes the door and leaves.

"What a small world," mutters the cousin, climbing up to front of the carriage.

As the vehicle begins to move, Isaac turns to look at his mother.

"He's my second cousin?" he says. "Weren't we supposed to be picked up by relatives from Bilibin? Why's that Kalayan-"

"Bilibin?" says the mother, looking at the father. "Kyle? You told our son we're moving to Bilibin?"

"What? Pontius lives in Bilibin, doesn't he? Or was it Lunpa?"

"Sara lives in Bilibin! Pontius lives in Kalay and Albert lives in Lunpa. Kyle, we have a lot to clear up to our friends now when they think we're moving to Bilibin."

"Your kinsmen are scattered all over Angara," says the father with a shrug, "it's hard to remember them all. But Kalay isn't a bad town either, or so I've heard. Son, didn't you say one of your new friends is Kalayan?"

Isaac smiles for himself, but sways aside when the cousin makes a swift turn with the carriage and stops the ride. He curses, and the mother worries about highwaymen. Isaac leans towards the window, and his heart skips a beat. Many promises he'd given, but few he'd kept. But now, he remembered a promise he'd once forgotten, and only the gods know how much he wanted to be a man of his word now.

"Yes Dad," says Isaac, as a sunny smile creeps up to his face. "I have a friend from Kalay. I have a very good friend from Kalay."